



Social Picture Of The 20th Century In The Novel Mala Janha(The Dying Moon)

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Abstract:

This essay explores how 20th-century literature gradually shifted from romantic imagination and idealized storytelling toward social realism and the exploration of individual human experiences. During this period, writers became more concerned with portraying the realities of everyday life, social inequalities, psychological conflicts, and the struggles of ordinary people. In Odia literature, Upendra Kishore Das made a significant contribution through his classic novel *Mala Janha*. The novel presents a powerful and realistic picture of rural Odia society and reflects the socio-cultural conditions of the time with remarkable depth and sensitivity. The discussion in this essay focuses on the tragic journey of the female protagonist, Sati, whose life becomes a symbol of suffering, emotional conflict, and social oppression. Through her experiences, the novel vividly portrays rural life, poverty, traditional customs, and deeply rooted superstitions that continue to influence society. At the same time, the narrative explores psychological struggles and inner emotional tensions, giving importance to the human mind and personal identity. The complex relationships among family members and the wider community further reveal the cultural and moral structure of village society. Thus, *Mala Janha* stands as an important example of social realism in Odia literature and highlights the transformation of literary themes during the 20th century.

Keywords:

Mala Janha, Upendra Kishore Das, Binsa Sataka, Samajachitra, Gramina Jibana, Manastattwika.

Introduction

When literature adopted **realities** instead of **imagination** as its chief ingredients, it got to be 'owned' by *the individual* rather than remaining with *the larger community*. Different genres of literature like story, poetry, drama, etc. began to be written in this style, adopting social realities as their themes while describing events taking place in society. Novel-writing also followed this new literary trend and went with the flow. Novel as a literary genre became quite influential due to its wider scope for depicting the larger life.

In due course, the Odia literary world gave birth to a literary personality who has been immortalized by his one novel with its ageless topical relevance! He is novelist Upendra Kishore Das, and his novel in question is the Odia classic **Mala Janha** (The Dying Moon). The title of the novel itself gives a clear indication of its uniqueness, and somehow foreshadows its dark subject-matter!

A brief discussion on how various societal realities of the time - socio-cultural landscape, ethical mores, human psychology and behavioral nuances, and other aspects of rural life- have been sketched in the novel is given below:

Thematic content

The novel starts with a soliloquacious monologue of the female protagonist **Satee**, in which she dolefully describes the ironical agonies of her hopeless life that has but a few flashes of sunlight, picking contrasting metaphors from the rural landscape:

“Even in the ponderous journey of a harassful life, one encounters rare ambrosial moments when in the midst of the scorching summer heat, unseasonal pregnant clouds suddenly appear, spreading balmymagical touches in a life sans cheer! But should I call it ambrosial moment? Nay, a transitory moment of tasty happiness that fleets away no sooner than it arrives, stealing life of its vital soul, rendering it wretched for the rest of its existence, can be anything but ambrosian! No, I cannot call it that!”

This way, from the very outset, the novelist has made it amply clear that the life of the protagonist **Satee** is wretched and painful. She is the only daughter of Anadi Mishra. She has been in some kind of a relationship from her early childhood with **Natha Nana** alias Lokanath Tiadi of the same village. Even though they both have romantic feelings for each other, they were loath to express it openly for fear of societal backlash. In the twentieth century society in Odisha, a young adolescent girl of 12-13 years of age was considered a burden on her parents, who would try to marry her off in time to get rid of this heavy burdensome responsibility.

True to the societal norms then, the parents of Satee wanted to somehow get the burden of an adolescent Satee off their parental shoulders sooner than later. As such, under the duress of circumstances and societal expectations, they found a ‘suitable’ match for Satee in the middle-aged Zamidar (land lord) of the village, who already had a son from a previous marriage. They gave her hand to the black, fat and middle-aged Zamidar in marriage, and unburdened themselves of their parental obligatory responsibility! Nath Nana, who Satee was in love with, tried in his own ways to prevent and stop this marriage, but in vain. Unable to bear this separation from his beloved Satee following her marriage to another man, a forlorn Natha Nana went off to Cuttack with a bleeding heart.

Satee was sent off to the groom’s house to live with her husband after the marriage. When she saw her husband for the first time, ironically, she felt stung with a sense of strong revulsion! A sudden bitter thought overtook her person, and she said to herself: Him, my husband! A fat pitch-black middle-aged man, adorned with golden armlet and chain, looking handsome! He is my husband! She felt very irritated when she took another distant look at the man through the window. A strong mixed emotion of revulsion, irritation and repulsion overtook Satee when she took one more look at the man, and she uttered, “Him, my husband!” Unable to bear the situation, she slammed the doors of the window and went off.

Every woman has one strong desire with respect to her husband. She wants her husband to be handsome with a strong and good character. This one single desire has overriding priority in her list of expectations of her husband, actual or prospective. Everything else can be adjusted to, depending upon circumstances. But this single most potent desire of Satee has not been fulfilled, and her dreams in this regard have been shattered!

The novelist has succeeded in capturing the woman psychology with regard to the concept of an ideal husband and a desirable married life, and he has beautifully portrayed it through the character of Satee in the novel **Mala Janha**. Satee could not get herself to reconcile with the fact that she has got an ugly middle-aged man for her husband, and she is manifestly squeamish about this. Moreover, in a queer turn of fate, she found herself face-to-face with the dreaded fact about her husband’s lustful character when she discovered his illegitimate extra-marital relationship with his housemaid Saurabhee! Under the circumstances, the pampered daughter of Anadi Mishra, Satee, is forced to live a life of indignity. She has even resigned herself to the situation of having to live with her mother-in-law, an adulterous ugly oldish husband along with a step-son. But this is not all; she has further ordeals to face!

As irony would have it, on her way to the temple along with her husband and a few servants, they are caught up in an unexpected rain storm. In the midst of the storm, she felt abandoned in the temple when her husband and the servants fled the scene leaving her alone to fend for herself! In a strange coincidence, she finds Natha Nana at the temple. The two of them spent the stormy night inside the shop of the local money lender nearby. Even though they were in love and there was mutual romantic attraction, they restrained themselves from doing anything immoral or forbidden. Next morning, with the storm past, both Satee and Natha Nana returned to her in-laws’ house. But her husband scolded her, branding her a ‘fallen woman’. He did not allow her in, and turned them away.

Faced with a slew of such hostile circumstances, the pains a woman had to undergo in a male-dominated social order prevalent then, have been vividly painted by author Upendra Kishore Das in the words of

the protagonist Satee: *“It took but a moment in a male-centric society to decide the harshest of punishments for a woman from her husband. No one came forward with a word of protest to stop the decision! On the other hand, the male folks, who have positioned themselves as the head of the society are allowed to go scot-free after committing scores of acts thousand times more grievous, any given day! No one comes forward to object or utters a word of protest! Alas, these males! Let it be, they are not like us women!”*

With no hope of a solution or reconciliation, Natha Nana felt morally compelled to take Satee with him, and left for Cuttack. In the meantime, there was an outbreak of Cholera in the village. Both the parents of Satee died in the Cholera. On the other hand, after staying in Cuttack only for a few weeks, Natha Nana and Satee felt the biting pangs of penury. They found life unmanageable in Cuttack in the face of poverty and deprivation, and returned to their village. Reaching the village, they discovered that the mother of Natha Nana had gone to Puri on a pilgrimage and his sister had left for her in-laws' house at a different place. They resided at his house in the absence of other family members. As was the wont in the social life of a village then, scandalous gossips and rumours targeting Natha Nana and Satee spread around, Achutumastre being one of the chief gossip-mongers. Finding the gossips, stories, insinuations and calumnies unbearable, Satee went to meet the village Headman Prabhakar Mishra to protest. She was hopeful that the Headman would do justice in the matter, considering Satee had struck a friendship with his wife years ago. But that was not to be! The village Headman was after all just another link in the chain of the powerful patriarchy.

With an injured ego, hurt feelings and bruised conscience, her feminine frailty caved in. Moreover, she could not stand the sight of her beloved Natha Nana being subjected to such infamy and harassment, which she thought was all because of herself; she wanted him to lead a normal life of peace and honour. So, she ended her life by jumping into the river.

And with the tragic death of protagonist Satee, the novel concludes with a tragic ending.

Conclusion

Novelist Upendra Kishore Das has conceptualized his novel **Mala Janha** around some complex social issues prevalent in rural Odisha in the early decades of twentieth century. Of the many problems afflicting the social life of rural people at the time, the author has focused in his novel on the issues of widespread illiteracy and lack of education as well as their innumerable negative offshoots like deep-rooted superstitions, misconceptions, evil practices and irrational beliefs. Profound ignorance of the uneducated rural folk had led to their deep-seated blind belief in many evil practices, which they had accepted as the ‘divine will of the God’, and were unaware that such simplistic beliefs were variously harming their social lives. Taking advantage of the ignorance of the simple and credulous rural folks, the high priests of society were exploiting them in various ways through the imposition of different social divisions like rich and poor, high and low classes, higher and lower castes, etc.

The few young educated people like Natha Nana, who were enlightened by modern Western education, tried to resist the exploitative social system and raised their voices against people's belief in superstitions and evil practices like the Zamindari system, social divisions based on class and caste, forced marriages, etc. that led to their own exploitations and sufferings at the hands of the people with vested interests. But their resisting voices proved ineffective and their efforts to end the evil practices did not succeed in the face of deep-rooted socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the people handed down to them for generations! On the other hand, Natha Nana, ironically, had to face societal push-back, and was subjected to various motivated scandals and disgraceful gossips in the village due to his love and support for Satee! Ultimately, Satee took her own life by suicide, unable to tolerate the injustice and insult she was subjected to in society!

The novel **Mala Janha** has proved to be a literary masterpiece, and has given its author Upendra Kishore Das much success and renown. Moving away from the dominant trend prevalent at the time in novel-writing based on creative imagination, novelist Das adopted social realities as the main theme of his novel **Mala Janha**, and focused on various evil practices and superstitious beliefs afflicting the lives of people in the twentieth century rural Odisha. His focus on social realities of rural life, its traditions and culture, and woman psychology through the life of the novel's protagonist Satee has made the novel **Mala Janha** a successful literary classic that will continue to shine brightly like a ‘full moon’ in the firmament of Odia literature.

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